

Opening Remarks: The Honorable Chauncey P. Goss, II
U.S. House Subcommittee on Water Resources and the Environment
September 24, 2020 at 11:00 a.m.



Good morning Chairwoman Napolitano, Ranking Member Westerman, and subcommittee members, thank you for hosting today's hearing and discussing "The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan and Water Management in Florida." Thank you for the opportunity to be here today to speak with you about saving America's Everglades and water management in South Florida. My name is Chauncey Goss, and, as an appointee of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, I have the privilege of serving as the Chairman of the South Florida Water Management District's Governing Board.

America's Everglades, affectionately known as the *River of Grass*, is a crown jewel of natural resources in the United States of America. Her history and subsequent road to restoration demonstrate the sheer power of American innovation and determination. Allow me to tell you the history of the Everglades, how we are actively undertaking the largest environmental restoration project in the world, and what the future of South Florida looks like once we complete the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan that Congress wisely authorized two decades ago.

A vast wetland, America's Everglades once spanned from what is now bustling Orlando in the central part of the state all the way south to the very end of the Florida peninsula, south of present-day Miami. The Everglades story begins several hundred years ago when she was inhospitable to people but a watery mecca for birds and wildlife. Wading birds, whose population numbers are used as indicators for ecological health, were once so plentiful in the Everglades that they reportedly darkened the skies overhead like storm clouds. The few settlers and explorers who did travel into the Everglades report having to cover themselves head-to-toe to protect from the swarms of buzzing mosquitos.

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But what seemed like uninhabitable swampland to some quickly became an opportunity to others. The rich soils proved to be incredibly productive for agriculture. And entrepreneurs built expansive railroads to market Florida's iconic coasts as a prime winter destination. With opportunity on the horizon, people flocked to the much milder South Florida climate. Towns blossomed along our coasts and inland near agricultural operations.

The 60-plus inches of average annual rainfall during our wet season and the intense hurricanes proved that picturesque South Florida was not always a year-round sunny paradise. Without proper canals to drain water off the land, flooding became the norm during South Florida's frequent storms. Even worse, thousands perished after major hurricanes hit South Florida in the early Twentieth Century and walls of water swept entire communities away. Floridians cried out for help and Congress authorized what is known as the Central and South Florida Flood Control Project or sometimes called the C and S F Project in 1948. To demonstrate its cooperation and support with the Federal Government, the State of Florida created the South Florida Water Management District, a special government agency to support the collaborative effort. Together, the State and Federal Government built a massive public works project to provide flood protection.

The project was a major success for flood protection and to this day, we have never suffered human loss at the scale seen before the Central and South Florida Flood Control Project was completed. With this incredible infrastructure in place and the state's favorable economic opportunities, growth in South Florida exploded. Decades later, record growth continues and the sky remains the limit for opportunity in the Sunshine State.

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The Central and South Florida Flood Control Project led to South Florida being home to bustling international metropolises like Miami to charming fishing villages like Port Salerno and even quaint beach getaways in places like Sanibel Island. This natural beauty that makes Florida special and the endless opportunities are why my family moved to Sanibel Island on Florida's Southwest coast where I grew up.

The canals, levees, and water management infrastructure provided critical flood protection and allowed millions of people to live in the Sunshine State. But the replumbing of South Florida also caused negative unintended environmental consequences that are increasingly getting worse for our natural systems.

From the northern most reaches of the Everglades all the way to the southern bounds, Florida's plumbing has been greatly altered. Just south of Orlando, a once slow-moving, meandering river known as the Kissimmee River was channelized and became a water superhighway, shunting massive amounts of water into Lake Okeechobee and drying nearby floodplains. Lake Okeechobee, known as the heart of America's Everglades, also became human-managed with newly engineered outlets to control water levels in the lake and provide flood protection for communities surrounding it.

Like all estuaries, the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary on Florida's West Coast needs the right flow of freshwater and saltwater. At times, it is cut off from the freshwater it needs. The Caloosahatchee's sister estuaries on the east coast, the St. Lucie Estuary and Lake Worth Lagoon, are often inundated with too much freshwater—again a result of the flood protection system. Heading south, other estuaries like Florida Bay between the Florida mainland and the Florida Keys and Biscayne Bay off the coast of Miami, are both nearly cut off from their much-needed freshwater supply during the driest parts

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of the year. These types of negative impacts are felt all across America's Everglades—all done in the name of flood protection.

These drastic changes to our natural environments coupled with changing conditions have hurt both Florida's environment and our economy. Fish kills and seagrass die offs tell us our waterways are imperiled. Wading bird populations are significantly below their historical averages. And you might recall the toxic blue-green algae and massive red tide blooms we recently experienced when they garnered international headlines in 2016 and 2018. Guacamole-thick algae in our canals and dead dolphins on our shores seemed to be symptoms of an ecosystem in need of restoration.

I saw these negative impacts of Harmful Algal Blooms in Sanibel firsthand. I saw the sick and dying fish and birds. I heard people say they had a hard time breathing. And I watched as businesses that I have known for a lifetime suffer because visitors cancelled reservations to avoid the algae issues they heard about in the news.

These ecological problems don't just impact our waterways and wildlife. They also can cripple our economy. Floridians and visitors alike depend on clean water. And with more than 100 million people visiting Florida annually for things like its scenic beaches, excellent fishing and world-class destinations, we must continue to protect and restore the environment that makes Florida *Florida*.

We cannot go back to the Everglades of the past—none of us would be able to enjoy South Florida if that were the case—but by saving the Everglades we can avoid some of the worst unintended consequences from ditching and draining our River of Grass.

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I'm pleased to report that the Congressionally authorized Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, or CERP as its known here in South Florida, is making significant progress thanks to the support from the President and Congress coupled with the support from Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and our state legislature. CERP and smart operations of South Florida's water management infrastructure are the roadmap to a renewed and restored America's Everglades. We are well on our way.

The federal government and Florida have showed tremendous cooperation by jointly authorizing, funding and building the projects that make up CERP and other key restoration projects. Together, we have built several large infrastructure projects to help correct the environmental damage done by draining the Everglades. The restoration of the Kissimmee River, which I spoke about earlier, is nearly complete and showing incredible promise. And within the next decade, with continued support and funding, key CERP infrastructure projects are expected to come online and further enhance the Greater Everglades Ecosystem. The C-44 Reservoir and Stormwater Treatment Area will protect the St. Lucie Estuary from excess freshwater. The Caloosahatchee Reservoir will help meter out water to the Caloosahatchee Estuary when the estuary needs a boost of freshwater. And our top priority, the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir Project, will be a gamechanger for South Florida by conveying more water south where it's needed.

We're in a historic time for South Florida and the environment and in some respects for humankind.

This is our chance to reverse much of the damage and unintended consequences caused by decisions we made in the past.

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This is our chance to “get the water right” and improve the environment.

And this is our chance to save America’s Everglades for the people and environment that all depend on this tremendous natural resource.

Funding and completing the projects of CERP is how we do that and how we prove that the United States can do what no one once thought possible. Insurmountable environmental damage can and will be reversed.

CERP and better water management in South Florida will be great for our waterways, for our birds, for our fish, for our alligators. And yes, it will also be great for our residents and our visitors. Together, we can reduce Harmful Algal Blooms, ensure we have enough reliable safe drinking water for Floridians and visitors, and continue to protect South Florida from dangerous floods.

I want to thank you for having me here today to talk about the largest environmental restoration project in human history. I’m grateful for the ongoing support of Congress and President Trump. With your support, we can finish CERP, save the Everglades, and better manage South Florida’s water resources. And in Florida, you have a ready, willing and able partner in Governor DeSantis and the entire state.

I invite you the Subcommittee to visit South Florida anytime and see for yourself what we are saving.

Thank you.